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Why Are You Taking My...

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U.S. Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

If you took a trip abroad and have had food or souvenirs taken away by an inspector of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), you may be wondering why.

The answer is that American agriculture needs protection from hitchhiking foreign plant pests and animal disease organisms. Some countries have serious pests that do not exist in the United States, and USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has the job of keeping out potential troublemakers.

This effort is important. Exotic pests that get established in the United States cost much more to control than pests that have been here a long time, because newcomers are not kept in check by their natural enemies.

Items that cannot enter the United States include meats, fruits, vegetables, pet birds, ornamental plants, soil, and packing materials. All of these items are proven pest risks.

Inspecting officers from APHIS continually confirm the risk by making spot checks. Among the more than 240,000 prohibited plant products they confiscate in a year, they uncover more than 10,000 exotic plant pests and diseases. An outbreak of even one plant pest could cost millions—even hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.

More than 260,000 prohibited animal products also are confiscated in a year. Animal disease organisms hidden in these products pose an even greater risk. One such disease could cause a livestock epidemic costing upwards of a billion dollars.

The extra cost for controlling exotic plant pests and animal diseases ripples down from farmers to consumers in the form of higher food prices. So, in effect, taking prohibited items from people is insurance against outbreaks that would harm everyone.

Fruit



Forbidden fruit you bring from abroad can carry a whole range of insects and diseases.

Oranges, for example, can introduce insects like Mediterranean fruit fly (Medfly) and citrus blackfly and diseases like citrus canker and citrus blackspot.

The risk of letting exotic fruit pests into the United States is enormous. A serious outbreak of Medflies alone would cost \$300 million per year. Added to this direct cost would be indirect harm—such as environmental damage from pesticides and loss of export markets for American fruit.

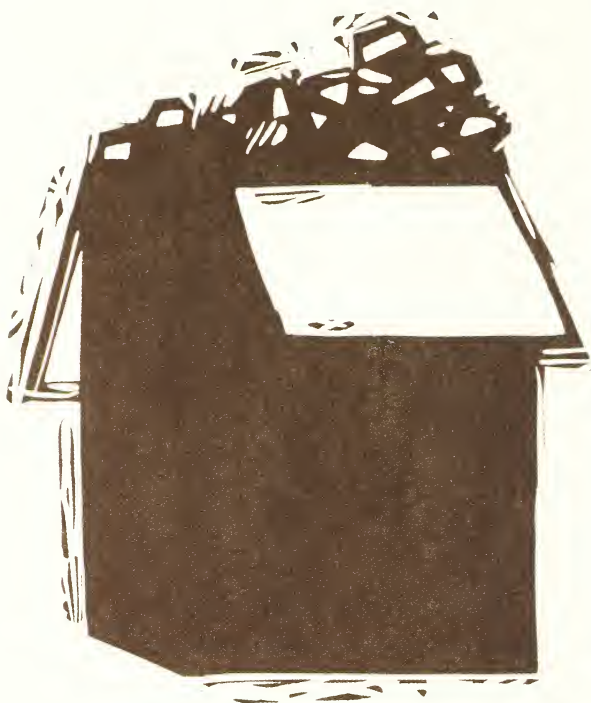
You often can't see pest damage on your imported fruit. The female fruit fly, for example, just makes tiny puncture marks in the skin of an orange when she deposits her eggs. The eggs develop and hatch unseen just below the peel. When you yell "yuck" because you find "worms" in your orange, the creatures really could be Medfly larvae. Spot checks by APHIS turn up more than 200 such Medfly larvae in confiscated fruit in a typical year.

The point is not that imported wormy oranges are bad to eat. The point is that larvae in discarded imported fruit develop into adults, mate, and can start to convert American oranges from good oranges into wormy oranges.

In fact, imported fruit that passed undetected into Los Angeles started an infestation of Medflies in orchards near the airport in 1975. State and Federal officials managed to keep the infestation to 12 properties and then eradicated it. But still the cost was nearly \$1 million.

(Legal authority: Plant Quarantine Act as amended; 7CFR, Par 319.56.)

Packing Material



Insects and even diseases can hide in packing material made from agricultural products like straw and burlap. Straw from wheat and rice, if infected with an exotic wheat smut, for example, could do billions of dollars of damage to American wheat fields.

You may be surprised to hear that agricultural pests hitchhike on packing material even if they don't feed there. One example is the khapra beetle, a tiny brownish-black pest of grain. It can hide in the folds of burlap and can survive there, without feeding, up to 3 years. But when the beetle reaches a supply of grain, it goes on a rampage. A colony reproduces so fast and eats so much that an infested grain bin literally comes alive with wriggling larvae. A khapra beetle infestation of the United States and Mexico cost about \$11 million to eradicate in the 1950's.

(Legal authority: Plant Quarantine Act as amended; 7CFR Par 319.69.)

Potted Plant

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Potted plants and soil from overseas are not permitted into the United States because soil can carry pests and diseases.

Most feared of the soil-borne pests is the golden nematode, a microscopic eelworm that bores into roots of Irish potatoes. It cuts potato yields drastically in Europe, where heavily infested fields produce a crop only every 4 to 7 years. Golden nematode has a foothold on Long Island and a small area in upstate New York, where a Federal-State task force is moving toward eradication.

You can import many plants legally and safely if you go about it right. Get advance instructions, buy plants from a reputable dealer, have soil completely removed from the roots, and mail to a USDA plant inspection station. Import permits plus instructions are available from: Permit Unit, Plant Protection and Quarantine Programs, USDA-APHIS, Federal Building, Hyattsville, Md. 20782.

Legal authority: Plant Quarantine Act, as amended; 7CFR 319.37—plants. Federal Plant Pest Act; 7CFR Part 330—soil.)

Meat



You are not permitted to bring back sausages and other meat from most foreign countries because animal disease organisms can live in meat for many months and can even survive some meat processing. The risk is that meat brought from abroad might not be eaten entirely and that scraps in garbage might be fed to animals in this country.

Disease spread through meat in garbage is rather common. For example, in 1978, African swine fever was carried across the Atlantic Ocean in meat that became garbage. Garbage fed to hogs in Brazil and the Dominican Republic caused disease outbreaks in both countries.

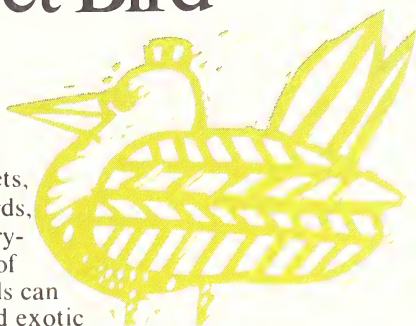
Previous experience with African swine fever shows that it causes heavy losses in new areas. An invasion of Cuba in 1971 killed about 445,000 hogs, representing more than one-third of Cuba's swine industry. An infection of U.S. hogs would drive up the price of pork an estimated \$2 billion the first year and close many U.S. export markets.

There are at least 40 other major animal diseases from abroad that could damage American livestock. Three especially dreaded ones are foot-and-mouth disease, a crippling disease of cattle, hogs, sheep, and other cloven-hooved animals; rinderpest, a highly contagious and fatal disease of cattle; and contagious pleuropneumonia of cattle, a disabling and persistent lung disease.

Both foot-and-mouth disease and pleuropneumonia have spread to the United States in times past and had to be eradicated in multi-million-dollar campaigns. Rinderpest invaded the Western Hemisphere only once, long ago in Brazil, where it was eradicated.

(Legal authority: Animal Quarantine and Related Laws; 9CFR Part 94.)

Pet Bird



If you bring in parrots, parakeets, and other pet birds, you may be carrying timebombs of disease. Pet birds can carry and spread exotic disease viruses, often without getting sick themselves.

For example, exotic Newcastle disease, a highly contagious disease of birds, came in with parrots from South America in 1971. The disease spread widely in a major poultry-producing area in southern California, eventually hitting 1,341 poultry flocks. About 12 million birds were killed before the epidemic was eliminated at a cost of more than \$56 million.

The cost of wiping out exotic Newcastle disease was minimal compared to the cost of allowing it to become established. Poultrymen would incur losses of \$280 million per year, and the price of eggs and poultry meat would go up accordingly.

Pet birds are restricted whether they traveled with you from your home or were acquired abroad. The limit is two per family. To avoid confiscation, be sure to get and follow the advance requirements. Requirements are subject to change, so be sure the information you get is recent. Write: Veterinary Services, USDA-APHIS, Federal Building, Hyattsville, Md. 20782. Also, be sure to contact the U.S. Public Health Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for other restrictions.

Sick birds are confiscated regardless of your arrangements and you should be careful not to acquire birds from an unknown source. You even may be risking your personal health, since some pet bird diseases can be spread to humans. For example, parrot fever transmitted to humans causes a nasty pneumonia accompanied by high fever.

(Legal authority: Animal Quarantine and Related Laws; 9CFR Part 92.)

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JAN 27 1987